

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Tony Hampton – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Fulton

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Chairman of the Sheffield Playhouse, Artistic Director of the Crucible, on the construction of the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, and press reaction.

SF: Tony, please can you tell me about how your interest in the theatre began?

TH: Well, yes I was born into a family where my mother was very interested in the theatre and she ran a small group called the Shakespeare Players and they performed in Sheffield in various places. I can remember being in Graves Park in an open-air theatre there, but she was a tremendously keen Shakespearian and she was a very very good actress.

If she, if things were different, as they are now about the theatre, where everybody was supposed to be a prostitute, I think my mother would have been a very great actress indeed, and so I was born into this and I was taken by her to see a lot of plays. I saw Lydia Lopagova, Marie Casa, and I saw all of Noel Coward's in London and so forth. From there I went away to school when I was twelve and I started acting whilst away and I played St. Joan.

SF: It was a boys' school, was it?

TH: Yes, I was a beautiful "girl" at twelve, I was a really pretty boy and then I played Richard of Bordeaux and I played the chap who was murdered at Canterbury.

SF: Becket, Thomas a Becket.

TH: Yes, In Murder in the Cathedral, so I had a very good run at school and I then went to Cambridge and I joined the Amateur Dramatics Club - A.D.C. which is the sort of leading, all the famous people except me came from there. I learnt there, that I really wasn't good enough. I realised that my voice wasn't good enough and although I loved acting I realised that I needed a bit more money than that. So that's it really. And then after the war T. Alec Seed, who was a great friend of my mother's and, he came to me, my mother had died by then, and he said "Would you like to be the Chairman of the Playhouse?" and I said yes and I did that for, I don't know...

SF: So you went straight in as Chairman, you didn't work up through the committee?

TH: No, I took over immediately from T. Alec Seed. I immediately asked David Brayshaw, who was also an amateur actor and very keen on the theatre, I asked David to join me and we had a very good board, yes, so that was really how that started.

And then somebody rang me up at work and said "have you seen the Telegraph?" and I said "no – why?" he said "well they are going to pull the theatre down and build a road through it". That was the first thing we knew!

SF: Was that in the local paper or the national?

TH: The Sheffield Telegraph, we hardly got anything in the national press at all, I'll tell you about that later. So we thought about it and we went to see the Council and we were met by Alderman Lewis, who was a very bright little person and he was the chairman of the Finance Committee, because most of those men don't have a clue about finance they just spend it and then say "can I have some more?".

SF: Yes, I understand that.

TH: So anyway Isador Lewis, he and I struck up a friendship and I said "what are your feelings?" and he said "Sheffield has got to have a theatre". I said "You must be joking", so he said " I'll look around and find somewhere for you". He rang me up a month or two later and, you won't remember, but there was a building at the top of that steep road that runs down to the roundabout.

SF: Down which roundabout? The one near the station?

TH: No, the other one, Parkhill. On that there is a really awful looking building – a Victorian horror.

SF: Are we talking about near Fitzallen Square?

TH: Yes.

SF: Where the old Post Office used to be?

TH: No, the other side, down towards the roundabout on the hill. It was a tram office.

SF: That's where they run the trams now, you know, they have put them back.

TH: I said "Well I don't think so really". So that all went by and we got in touch, and we were already a theatre which was subsidised by the Arts Council, so we knew them very well. So Izzie and I went down to London to, wherever it was, very posh offices. We met the Chairman and we said "What are you going to do about it?" They said we will support you. And I said "How much?" And he said "What will it cost?" and we said "Its not popular talking about millions but we'd like to build a new theatre.

So we talked to David and talked to Colin, both of them said we want a new theatre for Sheffield and we want something that will be very very adaptable and we can do anything in it and we want an open stage theatre. Well at that time there was only one in England and that was Chichester. And that must have been about four years old.

SF: That opened in 1962.

TH: And we opened in 1971, so Pat [Tony's wife] had already been to Chichester so I didn't have any worries about it because I'd seen half a dozen performances there including Laurence Olivier's Othello which was fantastic. But when Chichester opened they had a marvellous cast because London really liked it, because its so near to London and we had about three knights and three dames in the first house.

SF: Quality.

TH: Yes we had, they were famous, that very old lady who played the nurse in Ibsen, oh dear.

SF: I know who I think you mean – I have seen a list of it and I can look them up.

TH: And there is a lovely story about that because the stage was, not really quite like ours. Sybil Thorndike, she was sitting in a chair – Ibsen's play, and she was very very near, there was only a little step up to the stage, and she was sitting there, and she began to get up like this (demonstrating) and an old boy sitting in the front row. (too emotional to speak).

SF: Did he get up to help her?

TH: It was wonderful, any way that was the theatre at Chichester, so I knew I didn't need convincing. I read all about Stratford, Ontario, and Colin said "I am going to get in touch with Tony Guthrie and we will get him over and we will talk about it".

Then we, really the Arts Councillor took over from there, because we told them what we wanted and we wanted a 'thousand seat theatre' and we wanted an 'open stage'. So they arranged for Guthrie to come and a lot of other people and they chose the architect, who is a very important one, a London one. So it went from there really.

That's why I think I said to you, I never had any doubts about the theatre.

SF: You were convinced right from the start.

TH: Absolutely convinced and so was Colin and so was David so we just didn't take any notice of the press. We just didn't bother to read it. About the only person we had from London was from the Guardian or someone like that, and a young girl arrived and we took her out to lunch.

SF: Was that Mereke Bates?

TH: I think it was, she wrote a stinking article, absolutely stinking – we think that she had been got at by the professionals in London.

SF: They didn't like the idea of having a theatre in Sheffield which could upstage them.

TH: Exactly, they are all as degenerate as hell, actors – oh they are terrible people really. Don't go into the theatre, don't go into the theatre.

SF: I am too tall.

TH: Yes, you are really.

SF: When you talk about Sir Laurence Olivier. Did you ever meet him?

TH: That is the only time I met him. There was a girl working at Chichester who had worked for us, a PR I think she was, and she said, "would you like to meet him" and I said "Yes" and he'd only just come off the stage, she did very well really to get him. And he came to the door of his dressing room, he didn't ask me in, and she said "this is Tony Hampton, who is going to build a new theatre in Sheffield". And he asked me about it and he said "we realise that this is a very necessary thing in the theatre and good luck, we hope you do very well". Of course it was memorable that after that they built the National as well which they did.

SF: Is it – that's not a thrust, that's two...its not quite a thrust is it?

TH: Yes, it's about that round to there (demonstrates) but it is an open stage. Not proscenium arch. Very few are proscenium arches. If you go and watch a play now, in London and everywhere you can't find a curtain. There's nothing does that.

SF: Apart from the Lyceum in Sheffield.

TH: Which is probably the last one. The stage is dark, the lights go up and they pick out one bit of a thing and another bit of a thing or the whole thing, its instantaneous the moment you start – none of this “up goes the curtain” and (clapping) terrible.

SF: Slows the proceedings down. So you were committed to the thrust stage. How involved were you in the actual building when it was being constructed, were you, did you keep going along and seeing what was happening with it?

TH: No, we didn't have to go to London, we were allowed to get on with it all ourselves. We had a trust meeting every week with the architect, with the people who were doing it, and the builder, and so forth and so we threw ideas around all the time. There were only about 5 or 6 people on that committee and it all worked beautifully.

SF: Because you all knew what each other wanted?

TH: Nobody interfered, nobody said “we ought to be doing this”, we only had one chap who was always saying “oh do you think you're sure about this” he never said “come on, let's get going” but we just ignored him.

SF: That must have been so nice when you think of all the negativity that was outside of that.

TH: There was nothing negative in the theatre at all, everybody was absolutely committed. We'd got the money, we'd got the, Corporation didn't interfere, not at all, never interfered at all and the Arts Council didn't interfere. I had to raise this money but fortunately I'd been Master Cutler just before then so I knew all the people in Sheffield who had got any money.

SF: That would be somewhat of an advantage I would think.

TH: Oh – a tremendous advantage, I mean I could write to a list of companies, steel companies and all the rest of it, and say “Dear George or to Friend - I want £10,000 off you” and it came in – a quarter of a million.

SF: That was nice.

TH: It was, it was wonderful. So that's where it started and we never had any trouble at all. We had the trouble mainly from the media and I remember resigning from Sheffield Radio, or something, because I was terribly short of money and I said, to the chap I know who was Editor, “I said I'm sorry, but I want my money back, I need it”. Which was a pity because if I'd kept it in I have had about forty thousand pounds.

SF: Well, one of those things, maybe.

TH: Anyway he said, he introduced me to his Chairman and said "Tony has a problem, he thinks that Sheffield is a bit 'highbrow'", so I said "I don't think Sheffield is very highbrow but I am trying to make it so.

SF: You were trying very hard.

TH: So that was it really.

SF: What about the actual construction site itself? How involved were you and did you go down and have a look at how it was coming along, when it was being built?

TH: Oh yes. We used to go down regularly and have a look around, I remember that bit of Sheffield very well because it was theatre-land. There was one theatre, the Royal which burnt down and then there was the Lyceum, they were both together. Then a very old bit of shopping and one of those was 'Old Ma' somebody and she had an Oyster Bar and my father, when I was a teenager, used to take me down and buy me oysters and buy me a pint of Guinness.

SF: Was this before you went to the theatre?

TH: Oh yes. I was only about 18. Long before the war. So I remember it was a very nice bit of Norfolk Street. So, yes, we used to go, I can't remember very much about building it.

SF: Can you remember, I read that the whole design radiated from a pin which was put where the centre stage was going to be.

TH: Yes, you told me about that, I don't know. But I can only think that the whole design of the theatre was based on making things a distance from that pin because there was a huge amount of backstage space room. We were building our own sets, carpentry, actually building so we had a huge area behind because you see, you couldn't do a show on that stage where its one of those fussy sets with telephones and everything.

SF: No, it couldn't be naturalistic, could it?

TH: It can't be, its got to be simple, symbols and signs and whatever. So we had to have the capacity to build our own sets and we could do that.

SF: I did the backstage tour last week.

TH: A lot of room, isn't there?

SF: Yes, but they are talking of more space now.

TH: Yes, they always want more space, the theatre always wants more space and more money.

SF: For these new plans they have for it they are asking for 16 million.

TH: Oh good – they will need it too, but it could be terrific, it could be marvellous. Mind you the press will be moaning.

SF: Well, it has built its reputation now so it might be easier.

TH: Oh yes.

SF: Can you tell me about Colin George?

TH: Yes, well Colin came not very far after the war – you know.

SF: About 1962.

TH: 1962, did he, yes. Geoffrey Ost retired, and he was a wonderful director, a wonderful person and he ran a perfect Rep Company. But, of course, at that time, the theatre was changing and they didn't like repertory and the actors didn't like repertory and the idea of having one (a play) for two weeks, they didn't like that.

SF: It was very hard work, I would think.

TH: It was very hard work but, my gosh, they learnt their trade. And then, of course, and Colin George came and he was the new one, he was selected. Well the way it worked is that the Arts Council will give you 2 or 3 names and say we recommend these people. We selected who it was and we chose Colin. We were straight from an audience which were dear old ladies and dear old retired gentlemen, all sitting there and the curtain would go up and the maid would come and say "Hello!" and off they went...

SF: And they'd come in through the French window with their tennis rackets!

TH: Absolutely, and we went straight from that to something like, have you seen What the Butler Saw? Which had a mock crucifixion in it and people were walking out. "Blasphemy!" and walking out. I said to Colin "What are you doing to our theatre?" he said "I'm trying to jolly it up a bit". Colin and I, right from the start, I never interfered, we as the board. Apparently Alec Seed used to make little suggestions, an absolutely perfect fit – with Geoffrey but I think, and I am reading between the lines, Alec Seed used to make little suggestions, but Alec would never have recommended the things that we saw. 'Look Back in Anger'. Pat Mellor said "Do you know dear a girl actually fastened her suspenders on the stage". So you can imagine the troubles we went through.

SF: Yes, I can easily.

TH: We went ahead, we gradually changed our audience, we had young people, we had people who were heading the paper and knew what the new plays were and, of course, Look Back in Anger was a great success. So that was really Colin, and I knew and David was the same, we never ever criticised him.

SF: And I think possibly in a lot of ways you needed to go through that revitalisation to push you towards the Crucible.

TH: We would have found old ladies dead in their seats. People of your age would not have gone near it unless.

SF: I can't remember going to the Playhouse very often. But I certainly go to the Crucible now.

TH: But we changed all that and then the bad time. Colin went through a very bad time with the Worker's Revolutionary Movement, which was Corin Redgrave, he really was a shocker.

SF: And he came to the Playhouse?

TH: No, not Corin Redgrave no, he was a...they had a political movement which said that the actors will choose what play you are going to do, they will cast it and you will direct it.

SF: Dictatorial acting then.

TH: Yes, absolutely, so we just got rid of them.

SF: Which you might have been able to do in those days.

TH: Oh yes. They went to their union and all the rest of it, because the union was split down the middle, so we just said you will not be required on Saturday. You had to be tough with them otherwise they'd take over the whole thing.

SF: So tell me about when the Crucible was actually completed, it was there and it was the Opening Night.

TH: Well, I think it was a difficult time really because Colin had very strong ideas of what he wanted to do, he wanted to open for the opening show something which would show the various things that the theatre could do and he produced a little play for children, which was something, which you had joined. And he showed them how they could actually use the children for it – and it was very good. And he got one or two well known actors to do a play, and it was quite short.

SF: Was that Ian McKellen, the Chekhov?

TH: Ian McKellen and another very good actor who was a friend of Colin's. But it was little bits here and there. That thing they wrote in the Guardian.

SF: The clip I sent you?

TH: Yes, because it really was amazing, for Sheffield because they had never seen anything like it. The colours, the type of theatre. It was a shock really, absolute shock.

SF: Huge eye-opener I think, the whole experience of the theatre.

TH: Half of them said "Isn't this marvellous?" and the other half "It'll never make money, it'll fold up you know, its no good". They were absolutely, they had made up their minds whether they liked it or not and a lot of them didn't. So really we had to go very slowly and, of course, I think, I personally think and David did, the great mistake that Colin made was to put Peer Gynt on, which is a very difficult play.

SF: It's a very long, in-depth play.

TH: And very difficult to understand. Not everybody really understands what Peer Gynt is all about. A Norwegian. He could have done something like Twelfth Night or something like that, or anything, but not that.

SF: But originally it wasn't going to be that, it was going to be Tyrone Guthrie?

TH: Yes it was, The Shoemaker's Holiday.

SF: Yes, though I thought it was The House of Athens.

TH: Oh was it?

SF: But I think that might have been equally bad.

TH: I think so, I would not have played that, not have done that. I don't know why, I don't think Colin know his Sheffield as I do. And I would not have had a classic, I would not really have had a Shakespeare, I would have had something, well, if Look Back in Anger was on I'd really rather have done that. So it started, and Colin had one or two very good productions. He was very good on Ibsen, he produced some lovely Ibsens. And then, of course, being the theatre it was, we could do wonderful things like Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat. Wonderful musicals, musicals went very well on that stage.

SF: They still do. I think its Chorus Line they are doing at the moment, when I went around last week they were just building the set, except it wasn't supposed to be a set because it's in a rehearsal room for Chorus Line, but they had to make it so they could suddenly transform it into a theatre for the last scene.

TH: I obviously realise that building a theatre like that was going to upset a large number of people because my friends said "You can't have a theatre like that, we must have a curtain going up and the conductor doing this", and you know, they couldn't see any further.

SF: And you couldn't explain to them?

TH: No, and I would say to them that is the kind of stage that Shakespeare produced his Macbeth on – oh no it couldn't be. The audience sat behind in the globe and they used to throw oranges at the people they didn't like very much and that is what the theatre is all about.

SF: Yes, the audience is as much a part of the performance as the actors.

TH: You take away the barrier between the audience and the stage – like the old man who helped her out.

SF: Helped her out the chair – he was there – he was with her.

TH: When they were bored they'd start to talk about "I wonder who is the girlfriend of that actor there now...". Bring them into the building and they forgot about everything.

SF: And it still works very well.

TH: Oh it does. I saw my very favourite musical, Guys and Dolls. Have you ever seen it?

SF: No, I haven't, I'm not a big musical fan.

TH: Fair enough, I'm not either, I've only ever seen My Fair Lady, which I have enjoyed and Guys and Dolls, which is a wonderful play but that went terribly well there. So the Crucible is very very adaptable to do anything. You can do terribly terribly dramatic things like Greek Drama, you can do a wonderful happy joyous musical and I've seen in Chichester – I've seen J B Priestley's When We Are Married and it was a lovely production. There they had everything, aspistras and you know.

SF: And it's just adaptable.

TH: That's right. And they'd said, "How can you change your scenes, without having the curtain?" I said quite easily, you just black out the stage and one or two chaps put stuff on and you don't need a lot of fuss to create an atmosphere.

SF: You don't lose the mood, it just...

TH: You can create an atmosphere with just a seat and a table, can't you?

SF: And it makes the audience work harder anyway so they are more involved in what is on the stage.

TH: That's right, absolutely. So that was really the story and when I think it was not a surprise when I walked in because I had been in it all the time but I was very nervous because I realised that these were the whole of Sheffield. The people who were...

SF: The high society, the movers and the shakers.

TH: It really, Fulwood and Ecclesall and whatever and, I'd said I'd think it would be a good idea to put their dinner jackets on but to look at their faces, they were almost...

SF: They probably didn't understand what they were watching.

TH: No, it was such a shock, I mean in any case they didn't know anything about the theatre – they never went to the theatre but their idea – People would come up to me and say “When are you going to have Laurence Olivier and so and so and so”. I said “He's getting and old man now, there are different people in the theatre now”. And a lot of them didn't have television, they don't believe in it.

SF: Difficult to convince them.

TH: It was. I gave up in the end.

SF But it has all come right in the end now.

TH: Yes, I am very glad to know that you love it because if you want to make a theatre successful you have got to love it, certainly you've got to think it's wonderful and work for them to do the kind of things that you like. Forget that there might be a month or two of musicals, some people like that.

SF: We are so lucky because there is always something on in the studio, if there is nothing in the main house, the studio is there. I went to see a fabulous play the week beforeby Leslie Glaister, Bird Calls. It was about two elderly ladies living on a Scottish island, they were living together and they had taken themselves off to this island to get away from the gossip and it was just so serene and cosy and funny, it was just lovely. And that was done almost in the round. I mean they had actually built quite an extensive set.

TH: You can have a set.

SF: But that play needed to in the small intimacy of the studio, the main stage was too big.

TH: And, of course, it's very good for the running of the theatre because you can do those things in a small space where you would fill the main theatre. You wouldn't get the audience.

SF: No, not for a new play.

TH: You would fill it and there is nothing worse than sitting in the main theatre and only 20 people there.

SF: Especially when it's a really good production that sometimes breaks my heart and you just think I wish everybody could see and appreciate this.

TH: Absolutely.

SF: Right, well thank you very much. I think we will leave it there. So thank you Tony. It has been much appreciated.